

I

May

I'M SITTING in my bedroom, looking in the mirror. Her mirror. The wood scratched, glass flyblown. In front of it, a bottle of Chanel No. 5, the perfume evaporated to a dark amber, the label yellowed, peeling now. I hear Dad and Alfie downstairs, clattering in the kitchen. Alfie asking for Coco Pops and Dad saying no. Like it's any other morning. But it's not.

I'm wondering what she'd look like today. Her thirty-sixth birthday. I think of Ed's mum, Mrs. Hickman. Working in the post office with Dad. Her hair graying, clothes shapeless, in every shade of beige. Or Mrs. Applegate. Red-faced, rolls of fat bulging under her rugby top. Soft-focus, blurry versions of who they once were. But Mum never

changes. Twenty-eight forever. Model looks, she still went up to London for shoots. But it's here I picture her. Sundress hitched up around her legs, hair this wild gold, curls whipping around her shoulders in the sea wind, the silver of her hooped earrings catching in the sunlight. Laughing as we rolled down the dunes, sand in our eyes and shoes and knickers. She shone. Bright and sure. Even at the end. She still eclipsed us all.

They say I look like her. Gran, Mrs. Hickman, even that woman in the pub. I remember she was watching the deliverymen roll the beer barrels off the lorry. My hand felt small in Dad's rough heavy grip as he pulled me up the hill toward home. I held him back, straining to peer into the cellar, wondering what ghosts and creatures hid there in the damp darkness. I felt the words almost before I heard them. Shooting through him, his hand stiffening on mine. "Hasn't she got Charlie's eyes?"

She meant nothing. Trying to be nice. Or just remembering. But he didn't want to remember. He pulled me away up the hill. Me apologizing for her. "Sorry, Dad." Like I could make her take the words back. Make them evaporate. And take the memory with them.

I know he sees her when he looks at me. Sees that day. Me jumping up and down on the bed like it's a trampoline, shouting at her, "Get up, get up, get up!" Her lying on her side. Saying she just needs another hour. Dad dragging me off, telling me to leave her alone. That she's too tired. That we're wearing her out, me and Alfie.

That was the last time I saw her.

I look at my reflection again, turn my head. Trying to see what they see: her eyes, her smile. But it's just me. Brown eyes. Straight hair, a nothing color. Nose too big. I am the blurry one. The faded version.

I know why she did it. It wasn't me. Not just me, anyway. It was this place. The people. All of it. She thought it would be her escape. Her wilderness. Her Happy Valley. But it suffocated her. And I can feel it taking me too. The memory of her weighs down on me, squeezing the breath out of my lungs. I gasp and brace myself against the dresser. My right hand slips on something. I look down, and the weight lifts. I pick the envelope up and read the address again. My handwriting, deliberate, practiced. Like my letters to Santa Claus when I was six years old. It cannot get lost; its contents are too precious. Inside is my golden ticket. My escape from this life. An application form for drama school three hundred miles away in London. Because there I might shine. There I can be somebody else.

Then I see it. A flash of green flickering across the mirror. I look up and she is standing there. Back against the wall, hair pinned up. Her dress a shiny emerald, like the carapace of a beetle. She smiles. And though I know what will happen, what always happens, I turn. And she is gone. And I hear Dad shout up the stairs. "Jude. Bus. Now."

I pick the envelope up off the dresser and put it in my bag, hiding it among the books. I'll post it later, I think. In town. Not here. Someone will see it. He'll see it. Recognize

the writing. Nothing stays secret for long in a place like this.

But as I walk down the stairs, my school shoes clapping on the bare boards, I can feel the letter burning, screaming its presence. Like she did. Like I wish I could. And I wonder if today I'll dare to post it. Or if I'll bury it at the bottom of my drawer again. Lost for another month under my primary-school coloring books and swimming certificates. And I know the answer. And I hate myself.

2

THE BUS takes half an hour to make the six miles from Churchtown to Porth. I sit alone at the back, slumped against the window in the dull, heavy heat as we trail a tractor out of the village. Listening to the tinny chat of the driver's radio crackle into our world, out of place against the high-hedged lanes. The DJ talking about his night out in London, about places and people three hundred miles away. About a rush hour that doesn't move. Cabs and cars jammed into the buzzing streets.

We pull out onto the roundabout and join the pitiful queue of cars making their way toward the few chain shops and offices that pass for a town. And I listen to the radio and wish I were in that world, not this.

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Royal Duchy Girls' School is where weekenders and rich locals send their kids, thinking it's going to be all Enid Blyton with sea air, outdoor pursuits, and bread and jam for tea. What it doesn't say in the glossy prospectus is that outdoor pursuits means burying bottles of vodka in the dunes to dig up later or shagging sixth-formers from County Boys' on the hockey pitch. Or that, forget bread and jam, the upper-school dorms are redolent with the acid waft of bulimic vomit—this year's bikini diet of choice—and that half of Year Eleven are regularly in the Priory for rehab. I loathe school. And it loathes me. Four hundred overachievers, toxic anorexics, and It Girl wannabes, all crammed into a Victorian Gothic horror house on a hill.

And as if that weren't bad enough, there's Emily Applegate. My own personal rich-kid nightmare. If you just heard her name, you'd think she was all rosy cheeks and white lace, like some Jane Austen heroine, or a nice-as-pie vicar's daughter. She's not. She's a grade-A bitch who only exists to torment and torture lesser beings. Like me. And, like every supervillain, she has minions. Three of them. The Plastics, Ed calls them. Holly Scott, Holly Harker, and Claudia Dawson. Dawce. All blond hair and trust funds and weekend coke habits.

And just my luck. They all do drama.

It's the last lesson before exams. Before review sessions and Brodie's Notes and late-night panic attacks and Prozac on

prescription. But not me. I won't. I can't. I don't even drink. Not seriously, anyway. Because I don't want to be like him. He thinks I don't know, but I've seen the bottle. Everything's fine, he says. But it's not. It never is.

So we're sitting in the theater. It's dark and cool, the hazy heat of the school and town shut out. The only sound is Holly Harker's laughter echoing off the walls as she recounts last night's trash TV.

This is my world, my private kingdom. Has been ever since Mum took me to Drury Lane when I was six, to see some old friend of hers play Fagin in *Oliver*. "It's hardly the Royal National Theatre," she said. "But you'll love it anyway." And she was right. I was hooked. As the lights dimmed and the first notes of the overture played out across the rows of plush red seats, I could barely breathe. And as the curtain went up to reveal the perfectly rendered filth of the workhouse, I knew what I wanted to do and where I wanted to be.

I begged her to take me again. If not to London, to Plymouth. Dad would say we needed the money for salt blocks or fencing, but she always found a way. It was our drug. It still is mine. Pulling me in with its gaudy lights and greasepaint and promise of something more, something better. Under the lights, when the faces of the crowd are just an inky swirl in the distance. This is where I can be someone else. Where I can be who I want to be.

But for now I'm sitting at the side, in the shadows. Making myself invisible. Listening to Mr. Hughes — Hughsie — telling us that acting's not the easy option. That we need to

work hard. That we won't just walk out of the Duchy gates and onto the set of *Hollyoaks*.

"It's a slog. It takes courage. And wit. And hard bloody work." He pauses between each word. Taking pleasure in them. In their sound. And their effect. I watch Emily look up from her nails. Hear some of the others snigger. Thrilled at him swearing. Breaking the rules.

"And one of you is making it even tougher for herself."

The laughter falls away into silence. Holly Harker flicks a glance across at Emily, wondering if they were seen up at the Point two weeks ago, drinking when they were supposed to be in rehearsal. But it's not that. No one is in trouble. Instead he turns to me. And I know what he's going to say and my stomach rises into my throat. And I'm thinking, *Don't say it, don't say it, don't say it*. Willing him to stop. But he doesn't.

"Jude Polmear has applied to the Lab in London. And I think she has a serious chance of getting in. So, before we go, let's wish her luck."

My face is burning red, my head down, staring at a scuff mark on the floor. But I can still see their faces, lit with scorn and delight at finding the secret I've been carrying. And what they can do with it.

It was his idea. Mr. Hughes's. I needed his reference to apply. But I wish I hadn't listened to him, to his belief in me. Because his voice is drowned out now by their mocking and my own self-doubt.

Emily corners me at the lockers, the Plastics behind her, blocking my exit. “Who do you think you are? Keira Knightley?”

“Shut up, Emily.” But it’s not an order. It’s pathetic. Pleading.

She slams my locker door shut and grabs the key, forcing me to face her.

“Give it back. . . .” But it’s a whisper.

She mimics Mr. Hughes: “Project, Polmear. I can’t hear you.”

Dawce laughs.

“Give it back,” I plead. Louder this time.

“I can’t hear you.”

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Too near the surface. Like hers. Mum’s. Just waiting to come out. “Give it back!” I yell. People stop in the corridor, staring and whispering behind their hands.

Emily laughs.

“Please . . .” A tear escapes, running down my cheek. I wipe it away. “Please,” I whisper again.

She drops my key on the floor. I stoop to pick it up, and the heel of her shoe crunches on my hand as she walks away.

I stand at the school gates, on my way to the bus. I can see the postbox ahead, its gaping jaw waiting, black against the red. But Emily is right. Who do I think I am? I walk past without stopping.

3

I WASN'T always like this. Diminished. A shadow. Once I was as bright as she was. People took notice, because she was with me. Stella.

She came when I was eight. Just showed up at school one day, chewing Doublemint gum, and sat at the desk next to mine. The desk that had been empty ever since Dawce had begged to be moved, complaining that I muttered and talked to myself. But Stella didn't care what I did. I was her best friend. And she was mine.

Her hair was blond, hanging down her back, and wild, like her eyes. She didn't care what anyone thought. Even then. The world turned for her alone.

It was Stella who taught me to swear. "Shit bloody

piss.” As soon as I said the words, I willed them to disappear. But, defiant, they hung in the air between me and Dad. Still there, after he’d sent me to my room. Still there during tea, their rounded shapes appearing in the Alphabetti Spaghetti. I never swore at him again. But that second of pleasure stayed with me. Even after Stella left.

Now I sometimes wonder if she was real. If she actually existed. No one mentions her name. She’s been erased. Like Mum.

But she did exist.

I find it when I’m pushing the letter back down to the bottom of my drawer. I see the childish loops of my first ink pen, of the eight-year-old me, peering out from the shelter of an old birthday card. I pull it out, carefully. Like it might bite. Or burn. Like it’s dangerous. Because that’s what she was, Stella. Dangerous. And then I read.

When I Grow Up
by Jude Polmear, Year Three

When I grow up, I want to be my friend Stella. I met her one week and three days after my mum went to heaven, which is where you can eat what you like even Mars bars all day and no one says your teeth will fall out. My mum was called Charlotte Emma Polmear and she wore pink shoes and once she kissed a pop star. But this isn't about my mum—it's about

Stella. Stella is eight years old, the same as me, and six centimeters taller. She wears makeup and her mum's clothes and is allowed to drink Slush Puppies and watch grown-up films at the same time. I am allowed to drink Slush Puppies, but only on weekends and never if Gran is here. The best thing about Stella is that she isn't afraid of dares. Sometimes her dares are bad, like when she dared me to cut off Emily Applegate's ponytail. I said I was sorry about it a million times and anyway her hair is still longer than mine. Stella has blond hair and it is wavy. My hair is straight and brown but it is shiny when you put conditioner in it. My dad says Stella is a bad influence, which means she makes me do bad things when really I am good, but I don't think she means to. It is just that her rules are different. We have a lot of rules in our house. Like no elbows on the table and no wearing school shoes in the cowshed and especially no letting Alfie in with the cows on his own. Alfie is my brother. He is not even in school yet. Stella doesn't have any brothers or sisters. She is an only child, which means she does not have to share anything ever and she gets to call her mum and dad Georgie and Jack. When we grow up, me and Stella are going to live in the same house and eat chips and strawberry mousse every day and we will be actresses or on the Olympic team for gymnastics. So that is who I would like to be. Stella says you can be anyone you want. She read it in a book.

I lie back on the bed and close my eyes, the memory coursing through my blood, a dangerous heat. And I wish. I wish that Stella would come back. Because then I could post the letter. Then I could be someone else again. Someone who swears. And dares. And shines.

4

June

I STOPPED believing in fairy godmothers a long time ago, along with Santa Claus and good triumphing over evil. But somehow, someone grants my wish. Because three weeks later she's back.

The GCSE French exam is over, and I'm in the dunes, doing handstands like some schoolkid. I am some schoolkid. For now—my kilt hanging upside down, hem falling around my chest, regulation knickers up to my waist. Looking at the new world order, sky at the bottom, sea and beach at the top. That's when I see her. Taller now. Ray-Bans on, the black lace of her bra showing. Packet of cigarettes in her hand. Stella.